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President selects Webster to take the reins at CIA

By Bill Gertz
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President Reagan yesterday nominated FBI Director William Webster, a former federal judge, to head the CIA.

He was chosen after Robert Gates, the agency's No. 2 man, asked Monday that his name be withdrawn. Mr. Gates was under fire from the Senate for his role in the controversy over the administration's arms dealing with Iran.

No replacement for Mr. Webster, FBI director since 1978, was announced by the White House, but sources said a leading candidate is D. Lowell Jensen, a U.S. District Court judge in San Francisco and deputy attorney general until last year.

"Bill Webster will bring remarkable breadth and depth of experience as well as an outstanding record of achievement to this position," Mr. Reagan said in a written statement released at the White House last night.

The president called Mr. Webster yesterday morning to offer him the CIA director's

job. He accepted shortly after 6 p.m.

In nominating Mr. Webster, the president praised him for strengthening the FBI's counterespionage capabilities.

The FBI is responsible for fighting domestic crime and conducts counterespionage activities within the United States. The CIA is limited to conducting its intelligence activities overseas.

Mr. Gates had come under fire from the Senate Intelligence Committee during two days of hearings on his nomination last month. He was questioned by the panel on his role, as CIA intelligence director, in preparing CIA analyses on Iran and on his later role in preparing the Nov. 21 committee testimony of former Director William J. Casey.

Mr. Casey resigned Feb. 2 after surgery in December to remove a cancerous brain tumor.

The committee had planned to question Mr. Gates during a third hearing this week following the release of the Tower commission report, which criticized the CIA's analytical and operations procedures.

Mr. Gates denied in a statement released Monday that he had acted improperly at the CIA during the course of the NSC covert operation,

but he admitted in Senate testimony that the agency had made mistakes.

On Capitol Hill, the chairman and vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee issued a state-

ment praising the choice of Mr. Webster because of his "high standard of personal integrity, as well as his professional ability."

"His experience on the federal bench gives him a deep understanding of the law and the appropriate roles of the agencies of government," said Chairman David Boren, Oklahoma Democrat, and Vice Chairman William Cohen, Maine Republican.

The two senators said Mr. Webster especially excels in handling counterintelligence and counterterrorism matters. Hearings on the nomination will be held "as expeditiously as possible," they said, after background information on the nominee is sent to the committee.

Mr. Webster is not expected to run into any major problems during his confirmation hearings, congressional sources said.

Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole said Mr. Webster's selection meant the CIA job would be filled "by a real professional, who understands the ins and outs of the intelligence community and will provide a sure and steady hand at the agency."

Mr. Webster, 62, was chosen over several other candidates for the CIA post, including Lt. Gen. William Odom, the National Security Agency director; Brent Scowcroft, a former national security adviser who took part in the three-man review board that investigated the Iran arms deal; and retired Adm. Robert L.J. Long, a former chief of U.S. naval forces in the Pacific.

Former Sen. John Tower, Texas Republican and head of the presidential panel on the Iran scandal, turned down the post Monday, according to White House officials. Retired Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, a former CIA deputy director, also turned down the offer, officials said.

One White House official, who declined to be named, said Mr. Webster reluctantly accepted the CIA post

because he had hoped to pursue a lucrative career in the private sector next year, when his term as FBI director expires.

The official criticized Mr. Webster as someone "tied to the bureaucracy."

"This is not a guy who will take charge of the Reagan Doctrine [of support for anti-communist insurgencies] anywhere in the world," the official said. "He has never spoken out on one strategic issue of concern to the Reagan administration."

According to Pentagon and White House sources, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger blocked Mr. Scowcroft from getting the CIA post. Mr. Weinberger was said to be upset about critical comments contained in the Tower report, which Mr. Scowcroft helped draft.

Another intelligence source said Frank Carlucci, the White House national security adviser, opposed the nomination of Gen. Odom "several times." Gen. Odom was known to be a favorite choice of some conservatives.

Mr. Jensen's court clerk yesterday said the judge had been in court all

day Monday and yesterday and, to her knowledge, had not been contacted by the White House yesterday about possibly taking over the FBI post.

However, during a trip to Washington last fall, Mr. Jensen said he was aware of reports mentioning him as a likely replacement for Mr. Webster. But he told The Washington Times he was happy to be back in California and enjoyed being on the bench.

"I don't know about that," he said, when asked whether he would be willing to return to Washington as FBI director.

A Missouri native, Mr. Webster graduated from Amherst College in Amherst, Mass., in 1947, received a law degree from Washington University Law School in St. Louis in 1949 and served as a lieutenant in the U.S. Naval Reserve in World War II and the Korean War.

Mr. Webster was named to the federal bench by President Nixon in 1971.

He was approved as FBI director by the Senate Judiciary Committee when the bureau was beset with controversy over FBI spying on domestic terrorists and alleged illegal break-ins conducted by bureau agents.

As only the third FBI director in the bureau's history, he has focused the bureau's resources on counterintelligence, organized crime, white-collar crime and counterterrorism.

He is widowed and has three children.